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ABSTRACT

The status of sport personality literature is reviewed in light of three key questions: Is there a sport type? Does personality relate to success? Does sport participation influence the athlete's personality? Critical assessment of the literature provides rather definite answers to these questions. Some theoretical underpinnings of personality theory are discussed which lead one to conclude that the trait approach is inadequate. New approaches are described that would allow personality to be assessed in light of reasonable theoretical premises. The atomistic view of personality will likely have to be dropped. There is little doubt that a new stance is needed in assessing sport personality. (Author)

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SPORT PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT: FACTS, FALLACIES, AND PERSPECTIVES

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It has long been commonly believed that certain psychological characteristics are related to success in athletic endeavors. No intelligent individual would ever make light of the importance of physical skills or talent, but what is the equation for success when talent is equated across athletes? In certain situations, the start of the Olympic 100-meter dash for instance, it is believable that any one of several athletes could achieve the gold medal. How much he or she wants the victory is often purported to be a salient factor in the eventual victor.

In recent years, individuals interested in this relationship between psychological characteristics and athletic success have collected personality data in the hopes of clarifying the question. Several specific questions have been raised and research surrounds each of them.

Is there a specific personality profile that characterizes a certain sport athlete, i.e. a football type or a wrestling type?

Are successful individuals and teams characterized by a specific personality profile?

Does athletic participation influence the personality of the athlete?

Certain purposes of the assessment of the athletic personality are inherent in the aforementioned questions. If there is such a set of characteristics that combine to comprise the football type, then the coach could select those individuals who possess the qualities for successful performance.

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This becomes increasingly important if one could find that certain personality profiles predispose success. In addition to selection, a more humanistic viewpoint might be to promote within the individual those characteristics which allow for increased self-actualizing performance.

If it could be shown that mere participation in sporting endeavors actually influences the personality of the participant, then perhaps various claims could be made for participation--enhancing cooperation, building leaders, ameliorating aggressive tendencies, and the like. Such claims have been made however, even in light of limited or no evidence!

There is little consensus in the area of personality from the psychologist's point of view. Even definitions of personality vary according to theoretical viewpoints--that is apparently the way it has to be. This makes for difficult understanding. With all the confusion, what should one accept? At the risk of providing a very superficial underpinning of personality concepts, let me suggest some reasonable positions that any personality theory ought to encompass.

1. The theory ought to account for a degree of consistency (a genetic component) exhibited across like situations, but it also must leave room for the behavioral fluctuations (an environmental component). This view of man is described very well by Kluckhohn and Murray (8):

Every man is in some respects

--like all other men

--like some other men

--like no other man.

2. Personality is more than we see on the surface and so overt responses are not always good indicators of the underlying personality structure.

3. The concept of individual differences must be heeded. Not all individuals will perceive a so-called "similar" situation in the same manner. Therefore it is to be expected that there will be interindividual variability of behavior even in these "similar" situations.

These aforementioned points have certainly not exhausted all the premises which a "good" personality theory ought to encompass but they are mentioned in order to provide a standard against which to compare some of our sport personality assessment practices. What has been the approach that sport personologists have utilized? Nearly all the work has been oriented around the factor theory which embodies traits as a basic belief. According to this perspective behavior is expected to be quite consistent and predictable and the specific situation in which the behavior is exhibited is not all that important. This translates to mean that questions could be asked in non-sport situations and the responses could be generalized to various sport situations. In reality then, the widespread use of Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire has meant that this prior premise of the consistency of behavior across situations has been accepted. How many researchers who have assessed sport personalities realized the limited view of personality as assessed by the 16PF? I am positive that dozens of researchers violated their own beliefs of what personality consists because they did not realize the underlying premises of factor theory. This is rather a sad indictment and reinforces the continual cry in the assessment of sport personality field that research must have a theoretical base.

Let us consider the trait approach to personality assessment for a moment. Research by Endler, Hunt, and Rosenstein (1,2,3,4), in the last decade, has certainly raised an issue about the validity of explaining behavior

using this tactic. When one attempts to understand, explain, or predict the behavior of another, what pieces of information are needed? Is knowing that a person scores high on the scale of aggression enough to conclude that aggressive behavior is expected? Are there no situations where aggressive behavior would be moderated or eradicated? Typically, personality traits account for less than 10 percent of behavioral variance in any given situation. That means that 90 percent remains unaccounted for. Such findings certainly breed little confidence in any explanation of future behavior from knowing the level of the personality trait. Knowing the situation alone does little better in accounting for behavioral variance. The solution to predicting behavior lies in taking a more sensible and realistic approach. The question is not trait or situation but rather the interaction of the personality characteristic and the present situation that evokes behavior.

In personality assessment of individuals from the trait viewpoint one does not always see everything. Under certain conditions (situation) even a person highly disposed to aggress (trait) will remain inactive and the reverse is also true--Clark Kent emerges from the phone booth as Superman. If the situation is not considered, then behavior may appear paradoxical. Athletes undoubtedly play roles in sport situations and these roles may be quite distant from their personality characteristics. In a sport such as basketball there are strong sanctions against certain aggressive behaviors, i.e. punching, throwing elbows, and the like. The assumption of knowing the trait is that future behavior can be expected. What good is this knowledge if a role supersedes personality? The athlete may also exhibit behavior that no paper-and-pencil inventory (at least one

that discounts the situation) takes into consideration. If a coach positively reinforces the "rah rah" type of behavior, is it too surprising to find a preponderance of emoting athletes (even if they might be highly introverted)? Understanding the values to be allegedly derived from sport participation and the impact of sport in the lives of many people, it would be surprising if their behavior was consistent with their personality.

Let us now return to the three specific questions raised earlier. What is the status of knowledge concerning specific sport personality types? Independent of all possible reservations, Ogilvie (13) claims that general sport personalities exist. This conclusion is drawn from a survey of the literature (up to 1968) and from data reportedly collected from thousands of athletes in various sport groups. As far as he is concerned, such types as the "footballer" and "race car driver" can be located. Kane (7) supports this personality typology concept and delineates a small number of characteristics that certain types possess. However he does add a qualifier to this conclusion when he states that these specific personality types are not altogether unlike other athletes in total personality. It would appear that his support for this concept is derived from isolated trait differences.

Kroll and his collaborators (9) gathered personality data on a very large sample of Czechoslovakian national athletes in more than 20 sports. There was no substantial support for personality types although a small number of significant relationships existed. This study is important due to the fact that large numbers of subjects were tested and various complex statistical analyses were conducted. An earlier study by Kroll and Crenshaw (10) reported similarities between football players and wrestlers in personality profiles and that these differed from other sport groups. This

finding lead the investigators to raise the question of similar demand characteristics--why should one expect dissimilarities if the athlete is expected to elicit similar behavior?

Another strong study (large number of subjects and sophisticated data treatment) was conducted by Sage (17). His data were collected over a ten-year period and included eight sport groups. There were no specific sport personality types--personalities across sport groups were similar. He cautioned the reader to be wary of studies utilizing limited data.

Rushall (14,15,16) has subjected the question of sport typology to rigorous examination across several sport groups, utilizing various sporting environments, and over long periods of time. His findings strongly refute the concept of specific sport personality types. Similar to the important findings of Endler, Hunt, and Rosenstein (1,2,3,4), Rushall (16) reports small proportions (17%) of behavioral variance attributed to personality traits. The environment is the largest source of variance which causes him to caution the researcher from thinking that there is such a thing as a football environment or a swimming environment--each is different.

There are so many considerations why a participant initially chooses a specific sport--peers, parents, models, availability, to name a few--that it appears to make little sense to search for personality consistencies. The premise is just not that logical, especially if situational variables are discounted.

Is there a successful personality profile? Are winners different from also-rans? Ogilvie (13) declares that there are consistent findings supporting this concept and that successful athletes are characterized by

emotional stability and high need achievement. There are also additional characteristics that appear with greater-than-chance frequency. The logic behind this finding is somewhat akin to "survival of the fittest." Only select athletes remain in contention the higher the level of performance--the others drop out because they cannot endure the rigors of success.

With the help of psychological and physiological data, Morgan (12) was able to predict with great accuracy those wrestlers who would represent the United States in the 1972 Olympics. The 10 wrestlers who eventually participated in the Olympics were distinctly different from the 30 who did not make the team. The Olympians were characterized by lower state anxiety and were emotionally controlled and possessed high psychic vigor. However, it is doubtful if such an accurate prediction (90%) could have been made without considering past success in wrestling and physiological data. Morgan's findings point to support for the successful athlete profile but due to the additional information utilized, no direct conclusion can be made.

Rushall (16) collected personality data on a college football team for three years and divided athletes into first, second, and third team players. No consistent personality characteristics distinguished the proficient athletes from the less proficient. He concluded that on the basis of personality information, it does not seem feasible to differentiate levels of football performance.

Again let us probe a little deeper into the relationship between personality and sport performance. Is it difficult to conceive that there are many roads to success? Is it not naive to expect to find a successful personality profile? Athletes with enhanced physical abilities and somewhat low

achievement needs could be successful. Athletes with high affiliation and achievement needs could succeed in spite of limited physical stature and no-more-than-average physical skills. The equations for success are endless. Personality could be an important aspect of success but it need not be.

Does the personality of athletes change as a result of sport participation? Ikegami (5) declares that changes cannot be denied but that causation is not easy to determine. Undoubtedly it is not just the matter of participation but the degree of involvement in the sport. What does participation in the sport mean? If changes were to occur they would likely differ across individuals and across sports. But as Ikegami stated, it is difficult to measure personality change. The whole question is tied to the reliability of the instruments utilized. Are apparent personality differences the result of change over time or due to low reliability coefficients?

Kane (7), Rushall (14,16), and Werner and Gottheil (18) find no evidence of personality change as a result of sport participation. These findings cover a variety of sport situations and encompass longitudinal data. Ogilvie (13) concurs with the above finding but has stated that his limited data hints at the growth-limiting possibilities of competitive sport.

A typical approach to this question is to assess personality characteristics after some prolonged period of participation and then attribute these characteristics to participation. Morgan (12) indicated that these characteristics are there to begin with and that the bulk of the literature supports this.

Does it even seem reasonable to expect mere participation in sport to cause personality changes without some planned and concentrated effort? Evidence would indicate that certain personality characteristics are more amenable to change than others. The literature is nearly unanimous that no consistent changes in personality occur nor is an athletic personality developed.

Prior to establishing improved methods of personality assessment, it must be decided what purposes are to be served. Do we look for the accounted-for behavioral variance attributable to traits and accept Kane's (6) viewpoint that 20 percent is a reasonable level in order to describe sport groups? Or do we wish to explain the unaccounted-for variance that the trait approach has left us with? How much longer can we overlook that large proportion of behavioral variance?

The perspective is clear! Individual differences, situations, and their interaction must be considered. The interaction paradigm considers the person interacting with the situation. As Yinger's (19) scaling technique illustrated, some behaviors will be mediated more by the trait or disposition across many situations, but other behaviors will be controlled more by the situation. We need no longer be satisfied with a restricted design.

Although we may have to drop the atomistic view of personality, there are several theoretical premises that are applicable to sport testing--Rotter's locus of control, Atkinson's achievement motivation, Kelley's attribution theory, and Zajonc's cognitive theory. Martens (11) indicated that these are complementary to the interactional paradigm. The S-R Inventories of Anxiousness and Hostility (2) could also be adapted

for use in sport situations.

From a glance backward to the status of the relationship of personality to sport performance, we perhaps would be very wise to consider Rushall's (15) caution concerning the attribution of independent variable status to personality--the relationship appears to be limited.

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